

A guide to the cockroaches of Australia

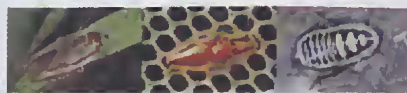
by David C Rentz

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paperback and ebook, x + 318 pages, ISBN
9780643103207, \$49.95

Let's set the record straight from the outset: I like cockroaches. Perhaps I'm in a minority fortunate to know that cockroaches go way beyond the relatively low number of species that instil fear into suburbanites and could be associated with public health fears. Many naturalists might be familiar with the pest species, but will probably also know the lovely diurnal *Ellipsidion*—such as that in the image which graces the book's cover—and blaberids such as the giant burrowing cockroach (*Macropanesthia rhinoceros*), wood cockroaches (Panesthiinae) encountered in rotting logs, and trilobite cockroaches (*Laxta* species) often abundant under bark of eucalypts and superficially resembling isopods (slaters). Hikers in the southeastern alpine regions may be familiar with the stunning viridescent mountain green cockroaches (*Polyzosteria viridissima* and *P. metallica*), sunning themselves on vegetation or on the ground during the short mountain summers.

If you have noticed all these and know them, you probably already have a copy of this book. If you haven't noticed native cockroach taxa, then it is time you did, and no excuses—you now have the perfect resource to guide you.

This lovely little book from the CSIRO 'guide to' stable will open your eyes to the wonderful world of cockroach diversity. Here you can delve into the diversity, distribution, and ecology of Australia's 550+ described cockroach species and learn about the estimated 1000+ species remaining to be described! Over 90% of these species are found nowhere else on the planet and many of these Australian species have small ranges ('short' or 'narrow' range endemism), a much more common pattern in invertebrates than in the more frequently studied



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groups of organisms such as vertebrates. Our under-appreciated cockroach fauna deserves the thorough introduction now provided by David Rentz. The guide sets out by introducing the fauna, reminding us that termites are really social cockroaches (though not covered in this book because they are still not cockroaches!) and provides a handy 'how to' guide to approaching cockroach identification.

Before getting to the nitty gritty of reviewing the Australian fauna there are chapters that review key workers in Australian cockroach research, biology, economically important taxa, cockroaches in captivity, collection and preservation, ecology and finally morphology. These chapters provide a context to cockroach research and provide knowledge that will be critical in using the keys and descriptive text to identify cockroaches in the field or 'laboratory'. Although please don't think you'll need to be able to understand and interpret tricky morphological features to gain a great deal from the book—many species can be identified to genus level by using the illustrations. Two hundred pages introduce the Australian native fauna, abundantly illustrated with colour photographs of, mostly, live specimens, black and white illustrations of critical elements and generalised distribution maps for many taxa. This is where

you can search for your latest cockroach discovery and find out much more about it. What fun!

Well produced, like other similar recent invertebrate guide books by CSIRO Publishing, and copiously illustrated with (mainly) high quality images (more than 500), this book should be on every naturalist's bookshelf or in their day-pack. In an era where many of us consider that Google has the answer to everything, guides of

this nature remind us that it **doesn't** and that websites rarely, if ever, package information as neatly and conveniently as a well-constructed book.

Nick Porch

Life and Environmental Science
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway,
Burwood, Victoria 3125

Where song began: Australia's birds and how they changed the world

by Tim Low

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406 pages. ISBN 9780670077960. RRP \$32.99

In my small collection of documents about birds there is a snippet from *The Australian*, dated July 24–25 2004, page 24, headed 'Bird theory takes flight'. It refers to a report published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, announcing that 'the DNA of ... perching birds ... showed they appeared in the western part of the ancient Gondwana supercontinent, the section which eventually formed Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea.' Thus a 150 year old avian evolutionary theory, which assumed that nightingales, mockingbirds, cardinals, robins and others had evolved in Europe or Asia, was overturned. At the top of the above-mentioned news cutting, a knowledgeable birdwatcher colleague has written 'We knew this ages ago!'

Most people didn't know this ages ago, but thanks to Tim Low's latest skilfully written, very readable book, everyone can become ac-

quainted with the story of how the old theory came to be discarded, and how strongly some eminent biologists rejected the facts. And that's not all — there is a wealth of other information, not only about birds, but also plants, mammals (including people), biogeography, ecology and conservation. The author has travelled extensively to investigate his subject matter, and accounts of his first-hand observations contribute to the book's appeal. Recent research is noted, but this book was published before blame for the spread of the plague through Europe was transferred from the black rat to the gerbil (page 255).

